

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

by

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Band conditions are always a source of fascination for DXers. Whether they are newbies, just learning the thrill of radiating a signal from their own antenna through the ether, or experienced like Charlie with decades of chasing the illusive weak signals, the magic is always fresh and exciting. DXers are a special breed of ham and many would agree that they are even a little strange compared to an all mode/ all band/ try any-everything amateur radio operator. Why? The same reason a DXer thinks it silly to spend thousands of dollars on a station only used to rag chew with locals on 75 or 6 meters.

There are ample arguments that could be made on either side of the issue and it's simple to see that neither could be proven wrong. The mere magic of connecting a simple piece of wire to your transmitter, throwing it over a tree and then using it to shoot your voice through the ether at the speed of light to another piece of wire hanging from a tree and through it, connect it to a receiver to have a chat is just simply awesome! Internet isn't that cool. Honestly now, is it? Hams would claim that communicating by Internet is like fishing using a hand grenade. Effective, but hardly cool! The explosive fisherman would claim it's the end that justifies the means and the DXer is often far more interested in the means or process than its end, actually speaking with the station. Indeed, the DXer becomes frustrated when he/she has no DX to work because he/she's worked everything on the air.

Don't misunderstand, please. Internet is way cool and surely here to stay, but not for the inexplicably magical way of being able to independently send and receive intelligence carrying signals using simple radios and wire or aluminum tube antennas. One is appliance operating like using a telephone and the other is more like a sport, uncertain and dependent upon the will of nature. That doesn't sound like a convincing reason to lure adventurous folks into the hobby but it has done exactly that for two thirds of a million Americans. We need more teen-agers to come aboard. As we all know since our average age is rising well into the fifties. Many of the new modes coming along like PSK31 have developed a fairly active group of supporters, interesting to note that many are younger highly computer literate hams. Hmmmmmm..... Very interesting to see that while CW is apparently on a slippery slope into history. Maybe a marriage of computer and radio technology will save ham radio and broaden its scope of opportunities for youngsters.

This fact didn't escape Charlie's family. One of Charlie's children is a research professor at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and although not a ham, knows enough about it to dash across campus to the Everitt Lab building on the meeting night of W9YH. He heads to the University's amateur radio station, whenever he needs advice in choosing a gift for his dad. There, he finds dozens of engineers in the making who are pleased to help one of their own UIUC professors in need of THEIR help for a change.

Last fall, one of the club members pointed out a QST advertisement for a radio/computer interface device that functioned in every known digital mode including the most basic one, CW. "It's really cool, Professor. We use one of these units here at W9YH. Would you care to see how it works?" They demonstrated how it helped them copy regular Morse code, RTTY and even the new mode, PSK31. Truly, it was very impressive. Immediately, the decision was made. "Wow", Charlie's son said, "Dad would love this and it might even tease him into getting out of the dark ages of using Morse code and give these new digital modes a try as well." The new breed of engineer being trained at most universities is very strong in digital technology and the students who were present that evening didn't include even one "CW type" who would have recommended differently. All he knew was that Charlie loved his code but he was getting older now and might need a little help with it. It makes perfect sense by conventional logic! If he were a ham, he'd know how wrong his assumption was. A ham understands another ham. A "CW forever" ham understands why another CW ham is the way he is. Even the most loving son will never understand, but what can you say? He loves his dad and wants to make life easier for him as he gets on in years and that's the most important point.

So last Christmas, one of Charlie's gifts was a very small black box that claimed to operate just about every mode but SSB or AM. On Christmas Day, Charlie read through the instruction book with interest and decided it was going to take some dedicated time to adequately evaluate, so he packed it back into the box

and put it on his top shelf for later attention. His son just doesn't realize that the last thing a CW ham would want would be a computer to copy and send for him, despite his losses due to aging. But regardless, the gift was generous and Charlie sincerely praised him for being so thoughtful.

Well, now it's Easter time and the little black box is still on the top shelf in its shipping box. Charlie realized that he told his son that he planned to hook it up and let him know how it worked but that was three months ago. The time to see how this thing works surely has arrived. So, Charlie laid everything out on his operating desk and re-read the instructions. It wasn't too difficult to hook it up and within an hour of following the directions carefully and finding the right jacks on his shack computer and radio, he was ready except for the software. The little box came with a very handy CD chock full of information including dozens of programs to use any of its featured modes. Charlie read through the CD indexes and guessed which program to use first, Digipan, based mostly on the scuttle he had heard on the local repeater. It was supposed to be easy to use by a beginner.

Very soon, Charlie's computer screen was filled with rainbow vertical bands of color, looking like a waterfall of paint. Charlie had the book in one hand and the computer mouse in the other, trying to figure out how to use PSK31. Where is the camera when a photo opportunity like this presents itself? It was quite a sight to behold!

Eventually, comprehensible text started appearing, letter by letter across the computer screen. "Say", thought Charlie, "This really is cool! A lot like RTTY but without the loud clackety clack noise of my old Model 26." The entire PSK process was totally silent. Not even the receiver speaker needs to be on. It took a few adjustments before Charlie was using the right Com port and had the TX and RX gains set closely enough to make the system work. Charlie spotted a DL station on the waterfall screen calling CQ and watched as he signed and had no takers. He called CQ again and this time, Charlie pressed the TX button and two fingers typed out his call. Would you believe it? He came back to Charlie's 35 watt PSK31 signal. Charlie hunted and pecked his way through a half dozen QSOs before Mary came in to make sure her Charlie was OK. Even when he wears headphones on CW, she can hear something as she walks by the shack, but all she heard were Charlie's fingers on the keys. "Is that Peter's Christmas gift?" she asked Charlie. He nodded and smiled. "It's fun, Mary, it really is. But, I don't think it we should dump my code key collection yet," Charlie replied. Mary smiled and rolled her eyes, "Heavens, no! But, we'll have to tell Peter how much fun you're having, won't we?" Charlie agreed that he honestly would.

Wireless radio communications was invented about a hundred years ago and for the last century, our best and brightest minds, often hams like Peter Martinez, G3PLX who invented PSK31 and SP9VRC who wrote many versions of its favorite software, have been improving how we send intelligence from point A to point B by making and breaking, frequency shifting or modulating the basic signal. Do you think the next hundred years will see changes as profound and diverse? I'll wager it safe to say that we can't begin to imagine what technology will be available to our successors a hundred years from today. Like other fields of technology such as aviation, medicine, or agriculture, if we simply assume that the next century will see as much change as the last century saw, Charlie and all his friends can only marvel at the thought, but grateful for the part they've had in the development.